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AUTHOR Winters, Susan; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Widely varying reports on the effects of divorce on children have created considerable confusion among therapists. Most traditionally trained secular marriage therapists view their position as that of an impartial mediator with emphasis on the well being of the individual. It has been generally accepted that the religious marital therapists are more focused on the family unit than on the individual. These two approaches are expected to be associated with different intervention preferences. This study assessed differences in secular and nonsecular marital therapist intervention preferences and divorce beliefs. A two-part questionnaire was devised to be administered to marital therapists from 26 secular and Christian church-affiliated counseling sites. Therapists practicing in secular and religiously-affiliated sites responded similarly on both the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale (MTIS) and the Divorce Knowledge Questionnaire (DKQ). Only one MTIS item differentiated between the secular and non-secular practitioners. Here, unexpectedly, the secular therapists reported greater use of questions exploring the potential value of forgiveness as a way of restoring loving feelings in the marriage. The failure to observe more differences on the MTIS suggests that therapists working with couples in secular and religious settings make use of very similar intervention strategies. While there is a widespread perception that marriage therapy offered by religiously-affiliated sites is more likely to discourage couples from seeking divorce, the results imply that these therapists are as successfully neutral as those practicing in secular sites. Contains 24 references. (BF)

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Relationship between Therapists' Attitudes toward
Divorce and Marital Therapy Intervention Preferences

Susan Winters, Linda Rogers, Eurinika Edwards
Jan Levingood, Kathy Ottaviano, & Catherine Chambliss

URSINUS COLLEGE

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Widely varying reports on the effects of divorce on children have created considerable confusion among therapists. Since the perceived harmfulness of divorce may affect how marital counseling is done, this study will examine how therapists' beliefs about divorce consequences are related to their intervention preferences. Those who believe divorce has more highly adverse effects on children are expected to make greater use of statements discouraging divorce and less use of those favoring separation during marital counseling. Those with more positive beliefs about divorce effects are expected to do the opposite.

While it is commonly assumed that marital therapists define their tasks as preserving marriages, most traditionally trained secular marriage therapists prefer a more neutral role. They are typically taught to view their position as that of an impartial mediator. They try to do what is best for the two individuals involved without influencing the divorce decision. Facilitating a constructive resolution to the marital problem is their goal, whether or not that resolution ends up entailing divorce. Despite the professed ideal of neutrality, it is doubtful that secular marital therapists are able completely to avoid influencing the decision making process of those they counsel. Subtle influences may take place as a result of swaying comments therapists make that may bias clients' consideration of their alternatives. To date, there has been no systematic examination of how this biasing process may operate in presumably neutral marital therapy.

Therapists who are more religious in their background also are generally assumed to exhibit more pro-family preferences. The

neutrality of marriage therapists with specific religious affiliations has also not been examined empirically. It has been generally accepted that the religious marital therapists are more focused on the family unit than on the individuals. Whereas the secular therapists consider how divorce or continued marriage could affect each member of the family individually, religiously affiliated therapists may most emphasize the value of preserving the family unit. These two approaches are expected to be associated with different intervention preferences. This study assessed differences in secular and nonsecular marital therapist intervention preferences and divorce beliefs.

Method

A 2-part questionnaire was devised to be administered to marital therapists from 26 secular and Christian church-affiliated counseling sites. Of the 75 questionnaires distributed, 37 were returned.

The first part of the questionnaire, referred to as the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale (MTIS), assesses marital therapy intervention preferences using 19 Likert-scale items. The items were developed by the authors to reflect statements therapists make that might influence client's attitudes towards divorce. Nine items are worded in ways to emphasize both the value of remaining married and the costs of getting divorced; together these comprise the pro-marriage subscale. Six items describe therapist statements that highlight the potential advantages of divorce and reduce social inhibitions against divorce; collectively these comprise the pro-divorce subscale. The measure also includes 4 statements that are neutral with respect to divorce and marriage, worded in ways to avoid persuasion of either type.

The second part, referred to as the DKQ (Divorce Knowledge Questionnaire), consists of 12 Likert format items and assesses therapists' knowledge about the effects of divorce on children. These items were based on replicated findings from empirical research in the area.

Various demographic characteristics were measured (gender, age, religious preference (DiBlasio, 1991), marital status,

parenthood, professional education, and years of professional experience). Subjects were separated according to work site to create a secular (non-religiously-affiliated) and a non-secular (religiously-affiliated, predominantly drawn from Catholic Services facilities) marital therapist group .

Results

Pro-divorce and pro-marriage subscale scores were calculated by summing the relevant items from the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale. Summary scores on the DKQ were calculated for all respondents by adding the directionally adjusted item scores.

T-test comparisons revealed few differences between secular and religiously affiliated practitioners. The secular and non-secular therapist groups were not significantly different with respect to age, gender, parenthood, education, or years in practice. However, there were marital status differences across the groups. More of the therapists practicing in secular therapeutic settings were single; those practicing in religiously-affiliated settings were more likely to have been divorced themselves.

Between-groups t-tests showed that therapists from secular sites were significantly more likely to ask clients "if you could forgive your spouse do you feel you could begin to love him/her?" than those practicing in non-secular settings ($x=4.00$, $s.d.=1.52$, $n=21$ versus $x=2.69$, $s.d.=1.58$, $n=16$; $t=2.55$, $df=35$, $p<.02$). Therapists practicing in religiously-affiliated therapeutic settings were significantly more likely to erroneously believe that the age of parental divorce affects college dating behavior than therapists practicing in secular sites ($x=4.38$, $s.d.=1.09$, $n=16$ versus $x=3.50$, $s.d.=1.15$, $n=18$, $t=2.28$, $df=32$, $p<.03$).

There were no significant secular versus non-secular group differences on the pro-divorce subscale, the pro-marriage subscale, or the DKQ scale.

Discussion

Therapists practicing in secular and religiously-affiliated sites responded similarly on both the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale (MTIS) and the Divorce Knowledge Questionnaire (DKQ). Only one MTIS item differentiated between the secular and non-secular practitioners. Here, unexpectedly, the secular therapists reported greater use of questions exploring the potential value of forgiveness as a way of restoring loving feelings in the marriage. Future research might explore the reasons why secular therapists perceive such an intervention to be more helpful than non-secular therapists. Perhaps the client population typically served by therapists working in religiously-affiliated sites have usually been sufficiently oriented to the concept of forgiveness prior to therapy, making such interventions unnecessary.

The failure to observe more differences on the MTIS suggests that therapists working with couples in secular and religious settings make use of very similar intervention strategies. Secular and non-secular therapists scored similarly on the pro-divorce and pro-marriage subscales, suggesting that neither group has a measurable bias. This is of particular interest, given the widespread perception that marriage therapy offered by religiously-affiliated sites (e.g., Catholic Services) places greater emphasis on conventional values and therefore is more likely to discourage couples from seeking divorce. The apparently even-handed way that the non-secular site therapists in the present investigation

encouraged their clients to weigh the relative advantages of both staying married and getting divorced, and their balanced use of questions designed to explore the long-term consequences of both options, implies that these marital therapists are as successfully neutral as those practicing in secular sites.

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